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### Deposited in DRO:

08 January 2013

### Version of attached file:

Submitted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Not peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Stapleton, Julia (2011) 'The historical context of Chesterton's interest in Alfred the Great.', *The Chesterton review.*, 37 (3/4). pp. 453-468.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.5840/chesterton2011373/474>

### Publisher's copyright statement:

### Additional information:

Home page of The Chesterton review available at: <http://www.shu.edu/catholic-mission/chesterton-review.cfm/>

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## The historical Context of Chesterton's Interest in Alfred the Great.<sup>1</sup>

Julia Stapleton is Reader in Politics at the University of Durham. Her edition, *Chesterton at the Daily News: Literature, Liberalism and Revolution, 1901–1913* (8 Volumes) will be published by Pickering and Chatto in 2012.

The standard account of how Chesterton's epic poem came to be written has changed little since Maisie Ward's biography of 1944. Its emphasis falls heavily on events in Chesterton's personal history as the source and inspiration of the *Ballad*. Thus he had entertained a romance centred on a great white horse since childhood. He had honeymooned at the White Horse Inn in Ipswich in June 1901. He had discussed some such poem as eventually emerged as the *Ballad* with Father Brown in Yorkshire in 1906; this resulted in an early version appearing in the *Albany Review* in 1907. The impetus quickened over the next four years and Chesterton wrote the piece in full over the course of a fortnight. When exactly this took place is unclear, although Ian Ker records that some (new) stanzas appeared in the *Chesterton Calendar* in January 1911.<sup>2</sup>

However, revealing though this account is, it neglects the wider historical context in which Chesterton's interest in Alfred developed. Accordingly, this article turns to the public events and influences that, arguably, played a pivotal role in bringing Alfred to the forefront of Chesterton's imagination; those events and influences also set the terms of the reception of *The Ballad*, as will be seen towards the end of the article.

### ***The Alfred Millenary, 1901.***

Most crucially, it is necessary to turn to the Alfred Millenary in 1901, the celebration of Alfred's achievements in what was then thought to be the most probable millennium year of his death. Recent research has shown how the Millenary built on a recent surge of popular interest in other centenaries – notably that of Oliver Cromwell two years earlier – and other major celebrations of an historical kind.<sup>3</sup> Although centred on Winchester, the Millenary caught the imagination of the nation more widely. Organised by a 'National Committee' under royal patronage, a three-day feast of lectures, visits to historic sites and

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<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for awarding me a Fellowship that made possible the writing of this article.

<sup>2</sup> I. Ker, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 291.

<sup>3</sup> P. Readman, 'The Place of the Past in English Culture', *Past and Present*, no. 186 (February 2005), p. 151.

celebratory luncheons took place in September. The celebration culminated in the unveiling of a huge statue of Alfred by Lord Rosebery, to great public acclaim.

What grounds are there for linking Chesterton's interest in Alfred to this event?

First, the Winchester celebrations were supported by a good deal of attention to Alfred's achievements throughout the Millenary year and in the years bracketing it: many poems, plays, newspaper columns and books were devoted to his life and appraisals thereof. Moreover, it was very much as an English rather than a British hero that Alfred was celebrated. Books, in particular, popularised and shaped the image of Alfred as bone of English bone. Some forty books were published between 1898 and 1902, most, if not all written for an unspecialised audience.<sup>4</sup>

One such book was sent to the *Daily News* for review in early 1901, just as Chesterton was making his debut as a reviewer for the newspaper. It was written by a Congregationalist minister, the Rev. Dugald MacFadyen, and was entitled *Alfred the West Saxon: King of the English* (1901). Chesterton's work was unsigned in this period. However, there are several tell-tale signs that he could well have been responsible for the review that appeared on 14 February. Not least, the author's surname is misspelt throughout, accuracy never being among Chesterton's strengths; and the review uses the noun "utterances" and the verb "to utter", words which recur frequently in Chesterton's writing.

More interestingly, the reviewer used the review to develop some ideas that bear a striking resemblance to those that lie at the heart of the *Ballad*. The clash between Alfred and the Danes, the reviewer insisted, was just as Bishop Asser – Alfred's contemporary biographer – portrayed it, and as MacFadyen echoed. It was not just a clash of temperament between two quite different peoples, the one desiring to be let alone, the other indulging in adventure and piracy "for the love of the thing". Instead, it was a clash between "two civilizations, two ideals, two types of life", what should have been a decaying Norse one and a growing Christian one. It was never certain, however, that the Christian ideal would triumph. MacFadyen made clear that in the confusion of the Viking invasions there had been a relapse into paganism, a paganism that recalled the nature worship practised by the islanders' Teutonic forefathers. This was apparent in the Latin hymns of the period. Everything now hinged on Alfred to stem the pagan tide.

The reviewer was much impressed by this account. It was to Alfred's great credit, he noted, that on the defeat of Guthrum at Ethandune he brought about a fusion of Saxon and Dane. However, at the same time he ensured the supremacy of "the higher ideal". This was only possible, the reviewer maintained, because Alfred was "a long way ahead of his time" in all matters religious. The West Saxon King was certainly astute enough to recognise what could be safely preserved from the old civilization to make the new civilization secure, as

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 158.

illustrated in Alfred's edition of Boethius (c. 480–535),<sup>5</sup> a Roman senator and Christian philosopher. This was something of which MacFadyen made too little according to the reviewer; for Boethius's

philosophical and moral reflections – the last utterances of a Roman world still mostly pagan – were for centuries the consolation of Christian thinkers, among them Alfred of Wessex himself, who paraphrased them.

But no more than was necessary to safeguard and enrich the new civilization would Alfred incorporate from the old. Even then, the emphasis of the review lay on the precarious nature of the “new civilisation”,

feeble and uncertain, and prone to relapse into the old nature-worship, as it often appeared to be. Even in his code of laws King Alfred finds it necessary to utter the injunction, “Swear ye never to heathen gods, nor in anything call ye upon them”.

Another significant aspect of the review is that it commends the book to those readers “desirous of making a holiday trip over the track of Alfred's battles from Reading, southwards and westwards”. This was precisely what Chesterton was to undertake in the summer of 1910, as will be seen presently.

The review was very scholarly, which might lead one to doubt whether it was actually written by Chesterton; it certainly lacked the fizz that was to become his literary stock-in-trade soon afterwards. Nevertheless, it could also be the case that Chesterton was still experimenting in style.

This review, then, is the first ground for linking Chesterton's interest in Alfred to the Millenary of 1901.

The second ground is an essay on Alfred that Chesterton wrote in September 1901, soon after the Alfred celebrations in Winchester. It appeared originally as an editorial in *The Speaker*, and was subsequently incorporated in the American edition of *Twelve Types* – entitled *Varied Types* – in 1903.<sup>6</sup> The essay reacted strongly against the proto-imperialist Alfred that Rosebery had sketched in his speech on 20 September when unveiling the statue. The outrage Chesterton felt at this misuse of Alfred's legacy is evident in every sentence. The essay begins by emphasising that Alfred was the stuff of legend because there are so few facts known about him, and in cases such as his, “fable is ... far more accurate

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<sup>5</sup> *King Alfred's Version of Boethius' De consolatione philosophiae with a Literal English Translation*, Martin F. Tupper (ed.); notes and glossary by Samuel Fox (London: Bohn's Antiquarian Library, 1864; New York: AMS Press, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> “The Alfred Millenary”, *The Speaker*, 28 September 1901, pp. 714–15; reprinted as “Alfred the Great”, in *Varied Types* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1903), pp. 199–206.

than fact”.<sup>7</sup> Of the few facts that were known about Alfred, Chesterton continued, the most important were not any imperialist adventures and visions of national greatness that may or may not have preoccupied him. The facts concerned instead his devotion to the well-being of his people. This could be seen in his commitment to their education, not least their education in Christian principles. As a result, Chesterton argued, he would surely have looked askance at the current fiasco of the British in South Africa. He would also have been dismayed at the use of that careful education in the “science of letters” he had provided to “drug the people with political assurances as imbecile in themselves as the assurance that fire does not burn and water does not drown”. Alfred was in no sense more typically English than in his “unconscious self-effacement”, a world away from the imperialist bombast of some of his present champions.

This second essay of 1901 is interesting in itself, not least in highlighting, *inter alia*, Alfred’s Englishness in certain respects, in keeping with the Millenary celebrations. But it is made more so by its closeness in tone and emphasis to a review of three other books on Alfred the Great that appeared – unsigned – on the literary page of the *Daily News* in August 1901. The reviewer paid little attention to the books under review, instead denouncing the apparent amnesia concerning Christendom in the Millenary celebrations. He continued:

Alfred was not “the noblest character in history”, he was not “the typical Englishman”, he was not “the founder of the fleet”, any more than he was the founder of the University of Oxford. He was a hard fighting mystic, full (as was Eudes of Paris, his great contemporary), of the defence of Christendom against the heathen and indifferent (save by the accident of locality), whether that enemy were Saracen from Cordova, Negroid from the Atlas, Mongol from over the Carpathians, or Scandinavian pirate. He was but one episode in a great battle, to whose successful issue we owe it that we can now write, read, and build, and that our Western tradition was saved.... Why can we not have that true Alfred written before the year of his millenary closes upon the legion of wishy-washy Alfreds who belong to nothing but nineteenth-century villas?<sup>8</sup>

It is highly likely that Hilaire Belloc was the author of the piece; he was certainly writing for the newspaper at the time.<sup>9</sup> If so, it may be assumed that Chesterton’s image of Alfred

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<sup>7</sup> This is a dictum that is echoed elsewhere in Chesterton’s *oeuvre*: see Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism and Nationhood: the England of G. K. Chesterton* (Lanham, MD., Lexington Books, 2009), p. 196. There can be little doubt that the scriptwriter of the John Wayne film “Who Shot Liberty Vallance” (1962) was a Chestertonian. This is apparent in the memorable line delivered by the newspaper editor after Senator Stoddart admitted later in life that he was not the one who finished off the villain after all: the editor asserted, “This is the west, sir; when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

<sup>8</sup> [Anon.], “Alfred the Great”, *DN*, 27 August 1901, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> R. Speaight, *The Life of Hilaire Belloc* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1957), p. 168.

owed something to Belloc, and vice-versa of course, and that crucially it was shaped in response to the events and interpretations of Alfred's legacy in the Millenary year.

### ***Retracing Alfred's Battles, 1910.***

Where did Chesterton proceed with Alfred after the Millenary year? Increasingly, he fixed his attention on modern political battles; these impressed him less as a contest between two well-defined opponents than as a "sham fight" between two parties who were basically on the same side.<sup>10</sup> This he recorded in his *Autobiography* in the course of recounting an electioneering trip to the West Country. It could have been at the 1906 election; it is certainly doubtful that he went electioneering at any time afterwards given his increasing disdain for the Liberal party. At some stage of the journey he passed the White Horse in Berkshire.<sup>11</sup> The visual reminder of Alfred's victory over the Danes (it was said to be constructed by Alfred to commemorate the victory) and the contrast it represented with what he regarded as the small-minded and venal trend of contemporary politics continued to exercise him in the years ahead.

In the late summer of 1910, Chesterton and his wife undertook a tour of the area west of the Vale of the White Horse in which Alfred had engaged the Danes – the tour that the anonymous reviewer of 1901 had recommended to his readers. He had no time off from his *Daily News* column throughout that summer; instead, he filed a succession of evocative articles from the places he visited en route.

He began the series with a meditation upon Ethandune. Here, he emphasised that the place at which Guthrum was finally defeated and at which, as he so graphically put it, "you and I were saved from being savages for ever [*sic*]", was anywhere but nowhere in the western hills. Dudley Barker has claimed that he had "muddled his geography" in setting the poem in the Vale of the White Horse rather than Edington, nr. Frome in Somerset, the most likely site of the battle, although for obvious reasons of effect.<sup>12</sup> However, without mentioning Edington, Chesterton dwelt at length in his *Daily News* article on the haunting desolation of the place in the vicinity of Chippenham, Wiltshire that, he stressed, was most commonly associated with Ethandune: clearly Edington. He did so in those dark, demonic terms familiar to readers of the tales that litter his journalism, particularly in the early years of the twentieth century. He pointed out that it was a menacing landscape, at the centre of which

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<sup>10</sup> Against this background of party collusion, Chesterton wrote an allegorical account of how a sham fight in military manoeuvres could provide the prelude to a real fight: see "The Sham Fight", *DN*, 14 September 1912.

<sup>11</sup> *Autobiography*, in *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, XVI (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), p. 128

<sup>12</sup> D. Barker, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (London: Constable, 1976), p. 200.

was a “black shapeless pile”. While this turned out on closer inspection to be an ancient barrow, he imagined it as a pile of dead Danes. He also imagined Alfred fixing his gaze on this ghostly feature of the landscape and regarding it as ominous of something, he knew not quite what.<sup>13</sup>

The series of articles in the autumn of 1910 continued with an account of his visit to Glastonbury, scene of another important episode in the history of English Christianity, this time of St Joseph of Arimathea and the legend of the thorn bush.<sup>14</sup> It too, receives a mention in the *Ballad*.<sup>15</sup> In the next article – “The High Plains” – he returned to the theme of Alfred and what he termed his “high humility”. This was a phrase he borrowed from a seventeenth-century Cavalier poet, Henry Vaughan.<sup>16</sup> He remembered the phrase when contemplating the panorama afforded by White Horse Hill. Like the plains which seem to rise with one when ascending an adjoining hill, Alfred typified the sense of equality with his people that characterised the genuine leader of men. His earlier association of Alfred with (English) self-effacement is once again in evidence. Chesterton now added that Alfred was typical of the saint: far from being elevated above the mass of humanity, the saint only differed from them in “really know[ing] he is a sinner”.<sup>17</sup>

The tour moved on to the marshes around the Isle of Aldeney surrounding the River Parrett in Dorset where Alfred allegedly hid from the Danes. In defending that island, Chesterton remarked, Alfred went on to defend the larger island called England. Indeed, in the reprint of the article in *Alarms and Discursions*, Chesterton was even more expansive: he remarked that the hero always defends an island, “a thing beleaguered and surrounded like the Troy of Hector. And the highest and largest humanitarian can only rise to defending the tiny island called the earth”.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Chesterton and the Significance of Alfred in the Early Twentieth Century.***

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<sup>13</sup> “Ethandune”, *DN*, 27 August 1910.

<sup>14</sup> “The Gold of Glastonbury”, *DN*, 17 September 1910.

<sup>15</sup> *The Ballad of the White Horse*, Book III, “The Harp of Alfred”.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Vaughan, “Friends Departed”:

O holy Hope and high Humility,  
High as the heavens above!  
These are your walks, and you have show’d them me,  
To kindle my cold love.

<sup>17</sup> “The High Plains”, *DN*, 24 September 1910.

<sup>18</sup> “A Romance of the Marshes”, *DN*, 1 October 1910; the variant appears on p. 257 of *Alarms and Discursions* (London: Methuen, 1910).

This running together of Alfred with England, humanity and – by implication – Christian civilization was well in keeping with Chesterton's inclination to "think big" at all times. But at another level England, humanity and Christianity had become the causes closest to him. In his view all three faced new threats that he outlined in other writings at this time. A sense of these threats clearly informed *The Ballad of the White Horse*, and in at least the following four ways.

First, it is significant that Chesterton should light upon Ethandune as an invisible place pervaded by black, threatening images. In this it was very much like England in his time, the sad state of which he outlined in a *Daily News* essay of 1903. A once vibrant and proud people with much in the way of literary and philosophical achievement to their name had become obscured by the darkness if not of Britain then certainly of the British Empire. Under the influence of Imperialism, he maintained, in an allegory with an obvious biblical resonance, England had been taken to the top of a high mountain and promised all the kingdoms lying below. She was in "mortal danger of a mortal and internal decay" as a result.<sup>19</sup> The contrast with the "high plains" occupied by Alfred in Chesterton's imagination could not be greater.

Second, it is significant that for Chesterton Alfred should have been a true "hero" and a true leader of men. Both as a leader and as a hero Chesterton defined Alfred in opposition to contemporary exemplars of these types. Modern leaders did not climb hills in order to remain on a level with those they served below; they did so in order to put as much distance between them and their fellow citizens as possible. An example here would be the unfortunate Walter Long who Chesterton satirised in his poem "The Revolutionist: or lines to a Statesman (1909)"<sup>20</sup> Similarly, popular heroes – such as Chamberlain – were not concerned to defend "the tiny island called the earth" but instead to pursue their own specious, usually imperialist agenda.

Third, it is significant that all these thoughts were developing in Chesterton's mind as he viewed with despair the transformation of the Liberal Party from a vehicle of Radicalism to a bulwark of establishment interests, not least an interest in secrecy. When his series of despatches from the scene of Alfred's battles with the heathen ended, he was brought up short by the present reality of inter-party conferences. These sought to strike a deal on the future of the House of Lords that, in his view, was in everybody's interest but the interests of the people. He had no sympathy with schemes for reforming the House of Lords to which Liberalism had now become a party. Not least, this was because it would preserve "the really dangerous oligarch" as opposed to the harmless backwoodsman whose fate was

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<sup>19</sup> "The Peril of a People", *DN*, 28 February 1903.

<sup>20</sup> "The Revolutionist", in *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton* (London: Methuen, 1933), pp. 154-6.



about to be sealed. Worse, such oligarchs were sheltering behind *Liberal* Peers, those of the mould of “Lord Milner, with his Beits, and Lord Rosebery, with his Rothschilds”.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, in the autumn of 1910 Chesterton picked up a pamphlet by a group of what he derisively termed “moderns”, although moderns in one of their many guises as “antiquaries”. Their aim was to return to “the Pantheism of the old English religion” in the time of Penda, King of Mercia, and the last great Pagan Anglo-Saxon ruler. The pamphlet stated that the “restoration” would take place “in the Old Assembly Rooms ... opposite to St. Mary’s ‘Old’ Parish Church.” Chesterton had great fun in effecting a *reductio ad absurdum* of the pamphlet, not least on account of the irony of the venue planned for the occasion. In particular, he emphasised that the most that could be said of Penda was that he was a Polytheist; as such, he was anything but a Pantheist. He concluded with the argument that was taken straight from his understanding of Alfred in relation to paganism:

It is one of the chief glories of Christianity that it has preserved the tradition of so much human paganism. But in no point has Christianity been so sanely loyal to paganism as in her refusal to entertain Pantheism.<sup>22</sup>

### ***The Reception of the Ballad and the refutation of the Whig myth concerning Alfred.***

Thus, the backdrop to the *Ballad* lay in two disturbing developments: on the one hand, the transformation of Liberalism into a weapon of tyranny in the dual form of wealth and the machinery of an oppressive state; on the other, the search for alternative sources of spirituality as part of the downward spiral of de-Christianisation in Britain.

Both aspects explain much about the hostile reception of the *Ballad* in the press as contemporary exponents of political and intellectual liberalism went onto the defensive. In the *Daily Chronicle* the poem was damned with faint praise: while acknowledging its “beauty” and “liveliness”, the reviewer judged it as “good enough to survive its philosophy as even now it lives without it”.<sup>23</sup> In the *Athenaeum* it was deemed “a fine poem which, with less of impulse and more of artistry, might have been a memorable one”.<sup>24</sup> The reviewer in *The Saturday Review*, a journal not noted for its friendliness to Chesterton’s work, could hardly contain his disdain: “Mr. Chesterton the propagandist and Mr. Chesterton the poet

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<sup>21</sup> ‘The Peril of Conferences’, *DN*, 26 November 1910.

<sup>22</sup> “Penda and the Pantheists”, *DN*, 29 October 1910; Chesterton refers in passing to the contents of this pamphlet in his *A Short History of England* (1917), giving the location of the parish as Ealing: *CW*, XX, p. 447.

<sup>23</sup> “Alfred the Cake Burner”, *Daily Chronicle*, 11 September 1911, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> “Recent Verse”, *The Athenaeum*, 14 October 1911, p. 453.

are like the Siamese twins, and an attempt to sever the two would be disastrous to both. Yet how one longs for a surgical operation.”<sup>25</sup> The reviewer in *The Westminster Gazette* also despaired of Chesterton:

To imagine Mr. Chesterton writing anything – whether in prose or verse – that would allow its life and truth to be its own lesson, as it were, that would present beauty quite simply and wisdom undulled by didacticism or uncontorted by hyperbole and paradox, is now a hard task.

However, this reviewer too thought that the poem could be enjoyed with “feeling and delight, for its own”, not simply for its author’s sake, the main attraction for many readers.<sup>26</sup>

There were a few surprising exceptions among the reviews, that of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, for example; the poem, in the view of its reviewer, was much in keeping with the end of the

over-artistic, elaborate age – necessary no doubt in its time – when so much attention was given in all directions to mere craftsmanship that men forgot to inquire into the purpose of things, and in some cases, forgot to ask whether, indeed, the things were needed at all.

The back of this blighted age the reviewer was glad to see. The poem came as a reminder that “Life is greater than Art, and Love bigger than Life ...”<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, this particular reviewer was using the *Ballad* to write the obituary of the Arts and Crafts movement associated with William Morris. While somewhat odd on the face of it, the connection becomes clearer in the light of recent research on Morris which places him in the context of the “Teutomania” of the late-nineteenth century. This centred on the belief that the English of the present were directly related to the Teutons of the time of Tacitus in the first century, with all their ardour for freedom, democracy, and communalism; for Morris this was expressed primarily in society and production more than ‘politics’ as conventionally understood. The contrast lay with Rome, decadent, centralising, and despotic. Enthusiasm for Scandinavian literature and mythology went hand in hand with Teutonism. This vogue certainly attracted Christian as well as secular thinkers such as Morris – the historian William Stubbs, Bishop of Oxford, for example – and became the basis of Socialist as well as Whig history.<sup>28</sup> But the hold of the Teutonic myth of English origins clearly accounted for some of the hostility that the *Ballad* encountered as a religious epic, obscuring, as it did, the emphasis that Teutonism placed on England’s divinely appointed

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<sup>25</sup> “The White Horse”, *The Saturday Review*, 16 September 1911, p. 369.

<sup>26</sup> “The Ballad of G.K.C”, *The Westminster Gazette*, 23 September 1911, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> “The Message of Alfred”, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 31 August 1911, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> A. Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda, 1880–1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 88–90.

destiny to spread free institutions throughout the world. While this aspect was no part of Morris's Socialist agenda, the wider influences in the sphere of Teutonism that Morris and his contemporaries imbibed made the clash between Alfred and his Norse foes simply a local quarrel within the same people.

This backdrop explains the problems with the poem experienced by Edwardian Liberals. The reviewer in *The Nation* – a prominent organ of progressive Liberalism – chided Chesterton for presenting Alfred's victory at Ethandune as "the beginning of England's greatness"; in reality, it merely "prepared" her for the beginning of her greatness proper, this being marked by the Norman Conquest. Upon this outwardly trivial distinction hung much ideological weight. Among Teutonist historians, principally Edward Freeman, the Conquest did not represent a breach with the Anglo-Saxon past but reaffirmed it in all essentials; this was particularly after Magna Carta took the edge off the feudalism introduced by William and restored the democratic element in English society inherited from the German forests.<sup>29</sup> Once again, Whig historians and Morris parted company here, Morris emphasising that the continuity with Anglo-Saxon England had been broken rather than maintained, and could only be recreated in the Socialist utopia of the future. But Freeman's emphasis on the retention of democracy was highly conducive to the needs of the "New" Liberalism of the early twentieth century, particularly when coupled with the state-centred perspective on English history that the Conquest and its aftermath seemed to underwrite.<sup>30</sup> Of this form of Liberalism Chesterton was a sworn foe; in turn, the historical significance he invested in Alfred's struggle with the Danes was misplaced in the eyes of New Liberals. *The Nation's* reviewer drove home his point about the Conquest's greater magnitude than Ethandune for modern England with damning sarcasm: "Danes, who are merely the obscure enemies of the ungrown greatness of England, are, beyond question, hardly as stimulating to vital poetic hatred as Danes who are the insolent powers of darkness".<sup>31</sup>

Chesterton, like Morris, was opposed not only to the prominence accorded to the state in Whig views of the legacy of Anglo-Saxon England but also the racial theories of English history that supported them. In the Whig version of the Teutonic myth – the version that Morris eschewed – this people had been uniquely favoured by God as His chosen race. Towards the end of his life, Chesterton was still preoccupied with the distortion of Alfred's

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<sup>29</sup> Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community*, p. 105.

<sup>30</sup> See for example, A.F. Pollard's *A History of England: A Study in Political Evolution 55 B.C. – A.D. 1911* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), written for the Home University Library. Of the period before the Conquest, he wrote, "The disjointed and unruly members of [England] had to undergo a severe discipline before they could form an organic national state" (p. 31). That discipline did not come with William the Conqueror but Henry II in the following century: "He fashioned the government which hammered together the framework of a national state" (p. 45). The next decisive step in the movement towards the all-encompassing state of New Liberal dimensions came with the Reformation when the Church, now subordinate to the state, ceased to be "the whole" and merely became "a part" of the community (pp. 227–8).

<sup>31</sup> "Alfred in Verse", *The Nation*, 9 September 1911, p. 845.

achievements through this triumphalist and racist lens. In an essay on Alfred of 1933, he discounted any notion that Alfred embodied a progressive principle inherent in modern England's Anglo-Saxon past. This was a deliberate broadside at the Teutonism of Victorian historians such as Edward Freeman and John Richard Green whose legacy survived in popular, if not professional historiography.<sup>32</sup> He also poured scorn on conceptions of Alfred as the "perfect ideal of the Blonde Beast", with all the "serenity and solidity" associated with that seminal figure in Teutonic mythology; he was instead "an original as well as an origin", an "individual rather than racial or national". Alfred was also "quite without optimism" in the sense of complacency about the prospects of defeating the heathen threat to Christianity. As in the unsigned review on Alfred in 1901, Chesterton emphasised that Alfred could only see darkness and the abyss before him, not the limitless possibilities of progress attributed to him by late-nineteenth century historians. This explained Alfred's additions to Boethius, an aspect of Alfred's achievement that Chesterton once again played up. They were inspired by an insistence that "it is a Divine providence that rules, and not Fate", emphasising how "vividly he understood the vital issue of his age". The heathens had interpreted the Fates as being on their side. Chesterton must have seen the English of his own day as afflicted by the same *hubris*; he certainly took the opportunity to point out that "what we call Fate is only the fashion of this world that passes away, if any man can wait for it to pass".

But Chesterton had to admit that there was some truth in the theory of Alfred as a quintessentially English figure, albeit not in the racially determinist way that his opponents presumed. Alfred, Chesterton maintained, was nothing if not experimental in dealing with the problem of integrating the Danes into his Kingdom. On the other hand, Alfred was anything but the imperialist adventurer he was often made out to be in order to justify and explain the origins of the British Empire in terms of deep-rooted national traits; that is to say he was not set upon "rounding everything and everybody up in the circle of an *orbis terrarum*", an impulse that represented an aberration in recent English history. That was not to say, however, that his significance for the advancement of civilization was minor. Chesterton spelled this out in terms that would make all his contemporaries – whatever their beliefs – less inclined to take their own age for granted. Without Alfred, he wrote,

[i]t was quite probable that the wild Western lands would be left for dead and Continental culture turn eastward to Byzantium and Asia; with what consequences none can tell. And if there had never been any monasteries or camps or cathedrals, there never would certainly never have been any shops or hotels or petrol-stations.

But there was also a significant new element in Chesterton's interpretation of Alfred, in keeping with his status now as a leading Catholic writer rather than Liberal journalist of the

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<sup>32</sup> Arthur Mee, for example: see J. Stapleton, "Faith, People, and Place: the English Union in the Writings of Arthur Mee and G. K. Chesterton", in C. Berberich and A. Aughey (eds.), *These Englands: A Conversation on National Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 223.

pre-war years. Most of all, Chesterton now stressed, Alfred's Englishry lay in the distinctive style of his Catholicism. This style of Catholicism he characterised as "a fanatical fixity of faith without fanaticism",<sup>33</sup> terms that bore a striking resemblance to his account of Cardinal Newman at the same time.<sup>34</sup> Here, he endeavoured to give an overt Catholic twist to a figure who had become a focus of keen national interest since the Millenary of 1901, building on several decades of 'Teutomania' previously. This new twist extended his earlier attempts to portray Alfred as the saviour of Christendom and the embodiment of saintliness in the ruler. But it was still national in focus, emphasising that the wider national interest in Alfred is something from which his own personal interest in Alfred and his own personal history cannot be easily disentangled.

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<sup>33</sup> 'Alfred the Great', in M. Ward (ed.), *The English Way: Studies in English Sanctity from St. Bede to Newman* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1933), pp. 56–64.

<sup>34</sup> "Why Newman was Misunderstood", *The Universe*, 3 February 1933, in *The Chesterton Review*, Vol. XVI (May 1990), pp. 3-7.